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ABSTRACT

The Student Participation And Retention Keys (SPARK) project at Blue Ridge Community College sought to determine why adult basic education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) students dropped out of the college's basic skills program and how student retention could be improved. With input from current and former students, a survey form was developed and sent to 192 randomly selected nonreturning students from the program year 1990-92 (55 percent of the 348 people who did not return to classes after their last enrollment); 64 surveys (33 percent) were completed and returned. Students ranked the following as the chief reasons for not continuing in classes: money problems, starting a job, lack of transportation, and work schedule changes leading to conflicting job/class times. Other students had finished the GED or had moved. After the survey was completed, an advisory interview form was developed and used as a framework for structured interviews with students, and as a basis for an advisory program to provide information and advice about the programs at the college and supportive services available from local agencies. The program's goal was to increase the retention rate by 20 percent; the achieved increase was 9 percent. This increase was achieved, however, during a year when enrollment increased 6 percent in basic skills classes. The project results showed that many of the factors that promote school dropout are beyond the reach of student retention programs, but that focusing on meeting student's needs can have a positive impact on basic skills programs. (KC)

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ED 392 996

REPORT FOR THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

SPARK

Student Participation And Retention Keys

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Blue Ridge Community College
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

CE 071 155

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INTRODUCTION

In the Student Participation and Retention Keys (SPARK) project, it was our intent to take a serious look at those factors which result in the loss of our ABE and GED students. We tried to approach the project with open minds. Several people were directly involved in the project; a director, an instructor, a coordinator, two program specialists and a secretary. We also asked for input from our other instructors and staff members.

Collectively, we thought that we had a pretty good understanding of why our students leave (or stay), and our surveys and interviews seem to lend some support for some of our ideas. Child care and transportation problems, for instance, are common reasons given by students for leaving. In our surveys, however, they were not cited as the two most common reasons for leaving. We had some surprises during the year.

While we gained some valuable information, we did not identify a single overriding factor which clearly contributes to our dropout rate. Additionally, the factors we did identify were often those over which we had the least influence.

With SPARK we have started a process rather than simply completing a project. During the year of this project we learned a great deal about our strengths as well as identifying some of our problems. Perhaps the most valuable learning achieved by the process we have started is the realization (or perhaps the reminder) that our students are individual people with individual dreams, concerns, and problems.

We established a goal of improving retention by twenty percent (20%) through SPARK. We weren't able to meet this goal. We did, however improve the retention rate by nine percent (9%) during a year in which we had a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in our "open" classes. Through this project we tried some new things. Additionally, this project has helped us to focus on things which will result in continued improvement.

Beth Cartwright
Pat Freeman
Betty Hipp
Rick Marshall
Wanda Miller
Marie Moore
Nancy Morton

The report was written by Rick Marshall

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Problem

Basic skills students frequently face barriers to their ability to participate in and benefit from the educational experience. Often, these barriers are long-standing ones which prevented them from fully benefiting from the public school systems. Additionally, adult students face life situations which are disruptive to learning. Our students frequently have jobs, families, and homes to keep up.

Basic skills students often do not take advantage of the support systems in place for them. In our attempt to make classes available to adults "where they are" in geographic as well as developmental terms, we remove them from the student services and other support functions which might be available to them at the college campus. While our community has a number of support agencies (such as Telamon Corp., DSS, assistance ministries, etc.), our students do not always know about or take advantage of them. By relying on a part-time faculty, we create an environment in which the student's primary contact with the college is through an employee who doesn't have time to make referrals or provide adequate advice. While our instructors are exceptionally qualified and dedicated people, they are themselves separated from the college by their community-based classes and their focus on basic skills education.

With the SPARK project, we attempted to proactively address the barriers faced by our students. The first segment of the project dealt with identifying the factors which contributed to drop-out rates. A significant sample of non-returners were surveyed to find out why they left. Drop-out rates were compared for the current year against last program year, which was used as a base.

Using information gathered from the initial survey, we developed and interview/advisory form which was used as a guide for the student-centered advisory program we started. We concentrated on new students as they came into the program and on the students referred by instructors.

Objectives

The objectives for the project were as follows:

1) To identify the factors which contribute to basic skills student "dropout".

2) To provide educational, career guidance, and problem-centered services to basic skills students in community-based, campus, and work site classes.

3) To increase retention in the basic skills program by 20%.

PROCEDURE

Planning

The SPARK project was started with several meetings of key personnel who were to be involved directly with the project during the year of operation. During these first meetings, the focus of the project was discussed. We decided on which questions to ask on surveys, and what we could do to promote survey completion and return. We discussed how we could identify administrative changes such as class locations, times, instructors, and materials. We also discussed procedures to consider such things as student attendance behavior before leaving.

The project was organized into several key components:

* Sampling procedures
* Survey construction
* Survey mailing
* Tabulation of survey results
* Development of an instrument to proactively identify and address barriers/factors associated with dropping out
* Implementation of an advisory program based on the developed instrument and procedures
* Post-implementation survey
* Tabulation of data collected
* Evaluation through an objective comparison of retention data before the program vs data generated during the program year
* Preparation of the final report

As our goal with this project was to improve retention, the team met numerous times throughout the year to share ideas, findings, intuition, and information. Procedures were adjusted based on our experiences during the project.

The Initial Survey

The team constructed the survey based on the following assumptions:

a. The survey should be relatively short (20 to 25 questions), and written at the 7-8th grade level.

b. The survey should be introduced with a cover letter which would include a "sales pitch" about the project, the purpose of the survey, and a statement emphasizing the confidentiality of survey results.

c. A "free gift" would be sent to each survey respondent (the gifts were inexpensive BRCC ballpoint pens which we already had available), and a pre-addressed stamped envelope was included to return each survey.

d. A tear-off section of the survey would be included to send the gift, and this section would include an invitation to check a block which would indicate that the respondent wished to be contacted by someone about current ABE/GED class information.

A sample of leavers were phoned and asked to provide input about the survey as well as their reasons for not returning to class. Current students were also asked for their thoughts about the survey forms.

The finished survey asked for twenty-five responses. Each question had a statement associated with five graduated-scale answers:

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. neither agree or disagree
4. agree
5. strongly agree

Respondents were asked to circle the number (1-5) of the phrase which best described how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

Surveys were sent to 192 non-returners from program year 90-91. This sample represents 55% of the 348 people who did not return to classes in the quarter after their last enrollment. The sample was arrived at using a table of random numbers.

Of the 192 surveys mailed, 64 were completed and returned. We considered the response rate (33%) to be a good one for this type of survey. All responders were sent a ballpoint, and those who asked were contacted with current class information.

Following is a ranking (most frequent to least frequent) of the items answered with either agree or strongly agree.

Rank	Question	Number of Responses
1	I had money problems	23
2	I began work	18
3	I did not have transportation	17
4	My work schedule changed	16
5(tie)	I could not come at class times	15
	I did not have enough time for class	15
6	Family members had health problems	13
7	It would have taken too long to finish	12
8	The material was too hard	11
9(3-way tie)	I had health problems	10
	I did not have child care	10
	Classes were too far away	10
10	I finished my GED	7
11(tie)	I did not like the classroom	6
	I moved to another area	6
12(tie)	There was a death in my family	5
	Family members did not want me to be in class	5
13(4-way tie)	The material was too easy	4
	I learned what I needed	4
	I was uncomfortable with class members	4
	I did not like the instructor	4
14	The GED is not important to me	3
15(tie)	I did not like the material	2
	I never attended ABE/GED classes	2

Eleven responders indicated "agree" and 28 "strongly agree" to the statement " I want to start classes again". This seems to agree with our experience of the way many of our students participate in programs. Many adults attend classes for a while, experience changes in their life situations, and return at a later time and often at other classes than the last one attended.

Seven responders agreed or strongly agreed with "I finished the GED". The lists of non-returners were compared against the GED graduates lists for the two testing centers (Blue Ridge Community College main campus and Transylvania Centers) and all matches were removed from the list to be sampled by the survey. It is possible that some students tested at and received GEDs from other testing centers. It is also possible that some persons had started the testing process but had not finished all five tests or were awaiting Writing Skills test results. These would not be on the list of completions.

During the course of the project we uncovered one other possible explanation for this response which is also a problem with our GED program. Although students are informed of the scores required to obtain the GED Certificate in North Carolina, we found some people who thought they had completed the requirements when in fact they had not. Generally, these persons achieved standard scores of at least 35 on individual tests (thus passing all tests), but had not accumulated total scores of at least 225.

This situation may occur when a student has a break of several months or more between tests. As our printout of test scores only indicates scores for currently active (testing) students, the student appears to have taken less than five tests. It is not immediately evident to testing personnel that the student has taken all the tests but scored less than 225. The student might not accurately remember previous scores and thinks he or she has passed the GED.

Awareness of the possibility of this situation occurring has resulted in better screening for previous scores.

Some of the most valuable information from the initial survey resulted not from completed forms but from those surveys which were returned as non-deliverable. Of the 192 surveys mailed, 29 were returned by the Postal Service because addressees moved and did not leave a forwarding address, had no one by that name at this address, etc.. This represented fifteen percent (15%) of the surveys sent. If another ten percent (10%) of the surveyed persons moved during the duration of the project, the total would be twenty five percent (25%) who moved.

This number of persons who have moved in the relatively short time frame of the project came as something of a surprise to us. This information seems to indicate that much larger numbers of students than we thought are in short-term living situations.

Tabulated data from the surveys, a sample survey form, and a sample of the enclosed letter are included in the following six pages.

BLUE RIDGE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Office for Continuing Education

October 17, 1991

Name
Address

Dear · :

You have been selected to help with a very important survey. Please take the time to fill out the enclosed question form. As soon as we receive your form, we will mail you a **FREE GIFT!**

We need information to better serve students in ABE/GED classes. YOU are the person who can help us get the information we need. The information will be confidential. No one will know who completed each form. We will use the information to schedule classes and order material. Please help!

To receive your free gift, complete the address section below and return it with your survey in the stamped envelope. Thank you for helping us. We hope you enjoy your gift.

Sincerely yours,

Rick Marshall

RM/bhh

****
****

Mail my free gift to:

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____
State: _____
Zip: _____
Phone: _____

_____ Check here if you would like someone to contact you about this survey or about ABE/GED classes.

ROUTE 2, BOX 133A
FLAT ROCK
NORTH CAROLINA 28731-9624
704-692-3572

SAMPLE

STUDENT SURVEY

Directions: Circle the number for the phrase that best shows how much you agree or disagree with each statement. All Answers will be confidential.

1	2	3	4	5
strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	strongly agree

I did not return to ABE/GED class because:

1 2 3 4 5 I finished the GED.

1 2 3 4 5 I learned what I needed.

1 2 3 4 5 the GED is not important to me.

1 2 3 4 5 it would have taken too long to finish.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not like the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not like the instructor.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not like the material.

1 2 3 4 5 the material was too easy.

1 2 3 4 5 the material was too hard.

1 2 3 4 5 I had health problems.

1 2 3 4 5 family members had health problems.

1 2 3 4 5 there was a death in my family.

1 2 3 4 5 I was uncomfortable with the class members.

1 2 3 4 5 I had money problems.

1 2 3 4 5 family members did not want me to be in class.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not have child care.

1 2 3 4 5 I could not come at the class times.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not have enough time for class.

1 2 3 4 5 I began work.

1 2 3 4 5 my work schedule changed.

1 2 3 4 5 I did not have transportation.

1 2 3 4 5 classes were too far away.

1 2 3 4 5 I moved to another area.

1 2 3 4 5 I want to start classes again.

1 2 3 4 5 I never attended ABE/GED classes.

Please use the enclosed stamped envelope to return the completed survey.

INITIAL STUDENT SURVEY

Directions: Circle the number for the phrase that best shows how much you agree or disagree with each statement. All Answers will be confidential.

1	2	3	4	5
strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	strongly agree

I did **not** return to ABE/GED class because:

1	2	3	4	5	
19	**23**	**10**	**3**		I finished the GED.
30%	36%	16%	4%		
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	I learned what I needed.
18	**19**	**15**	**3**	**1**	
28%	30%	23%	4%	2%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	the GED is not important to me.
41	**6**	**7**	**0**	**3**	
64%	9%	11%	0%	4%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	it would have taken too long to finish.
22	**20**	**11**	**5**	**7**	
22%	34%	17%	8%	11%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	I did not like the classroom.
22	**20**	**11**	**4**	**2**	
34%	31%	17%	6%	3%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	I did not like the instructor.
25	**21**	**9**	**2**	**2**	
39%	33%	14%	3%	3%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	I did not like the material.
16	**39**	**11**	**2**	**0**	
25%	47%	17%	3%	0%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	the material was too easy.
17	**26**	**13**	**2**	**2**	
27%	41%	17%	3%	3%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	the material was too hard.
10	**15**	**21**	**10**	**1**	
16%	23%	33%	16%	2%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	I had health problems.
18	**21**	**11**	**7**	**3**	
28%	31%	17%	11%	4%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	family members had health problems.
17	**19**	**9**	**10**	**3**	
27%	30%	14%	16%	4%	
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	there was a death in my family.
19	**24**	**9**	**2**	**3**	
30%	38%	14%	3%	4%	

1	2	3	4	5	I was uncomfortable with the class members.
21	**23**	**10**	**4**	**0**	
33%	36%	16%	6%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I had money problems.
11	**11**	**12**	**14**	**9**	
17%	17%	19%	22%	14%	

1	2	3	4	5	family members did not want me to be in class.
28	**18**	**10**	**3**	**2**	
41%	28%	16%	4%	3%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have child care.
18	**11**	**9**	**9**	**1**	
28%	17%	14%	14%	2%	

1	2	3	4	5	I could not come at the class times.
12	**22**	**8**	**12**	**3**	
19%	34%	13%	19%	4%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have enough time for class.
15	**17**	**10**	**12**	**3**	
23%	27%	16%	19%	4%	

1	2	3	4	5	I began work.
9	**19**	**13**	**13**	**5**	
14%	30%	20%	20%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	my work schedule changed.
13	**21**	**9**	**11**	**5**	
20%	33%	14%	17%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have transportation.
15	**18**	**6**	**9**	**8**	
23%	28%	9%	14%	13%	

1	2	3	4	5	classes were too far away.
17	**22**	**8**	**6**	**4**	
27%	34%	13%	9%	6%	

1	2	3	4	5	I moved to another area.
16	**27**	**9**	**3**	**3**	
25%	42%	14%	4%	4%	

1	2	3	4	5	I want to start classes again.
5	**7**	**5**	**11**	**28**	
8%	11%	8%	17%	44%	

1	2	3	4	5	I never attended ABE/GED classes.
27	**17**	**9**	**1**	**1**	
42%	27%	14%	2%	2%	

The Interview Form

After the survey was mailed and the results tabulated, an advisory interview form was developed. This form was designed to provide a general framework for a structured interview, without being so restrictive as to prevent a free exchange of information.

Through the interview process, students were encouraged to share information about their backgrounds, reasons for leaving public school, their families, hobbies, and goals. Interviewers also asked specific questions about teachers and their classrooms to identify potential problem areas.

Students were told that the information gathered through interviews was confidential. Each student who was comfortable with the sharing of information with teachers was asked to sign a statement to that effect.

The advisory interview was designed with the intention of drawing out the student. We also desired to leave the student with a positive feeling about the interview process. We asked questions such as "What is one thing you are proud of having done?".

The Interview/Advisory Process

In actuality, the interviewees generally did not need much "drawing out". We found that virtually all of our students spoke easily about their experiences, their goals for themselves, and their families (after a few minutes of getting acquainted). Many felt that their dropping out was the result not of a particular crisis (although a crisis was usually the precipitating event) but of falling progressively further behind their classmates.

Our students usually came back to school because of the need to find employment or get a better job, or because of their children. Most expressed pride in their accomplishments while in our classes, and looked forward to further achievements. Virtually all the students expressed a goal of completing the GED, even when they were ABE students who might take several years of study to complete this goal. Our students were also very proud of the accomplishments they had experienced with their children. Some were participating in our classes because they wanted their children to stay in school, and wished to be good role models.

As part of the interview process, we asked if any one had encouraged the students to return to school. Some had been recruited by our instructors. Few remembered seeing advertisements in the newspapers, in our quarterly schedules, etc. The vast majority of students returned because of friends, many of whom are or were enrolled in our classes.

Some students had very strong opinions of our instructors (some very negative, most very positive). In one evening of interviews a student in Class A loved the instructor at Class A but hated the instructor at Class B. At Class B (in another town) a student loved the instructor at Class B but hated the instructor at Class A. Both students were women, within a year in age, and of similar backgrounds. Both were driving in excess of twelve miles each way to study with the instructor of her choice.

With the advisory program we were interested in providing information and advice about the programs at Blue Ridge Community College, and in referring to local support agencies when appropriate for our students. We found that many of our students wanted to continue with their educational experiences after leaving our basic skills classes. We spent a great deal of time explaining the admissions process, scheduling interviews with the Career Center and Student and Administrative Services personnel, and in introducing our students to other folks at the college. Although no figures are as yet available about the number of students who will attend curriculum programs, we all feel that our project will increase these numbers.

Referrals to other agencies were limited and generally aimed at specific short-term problems. It is probable that students with more serious crisis situations just weren't coming to our classes. Exceptions were students in classes located at agencies which normally serve persons in crisis, such as the ministry serving the homeless (Ministry Seven) and the center for battered women and children (Mainstay). JOBS case managers are stationed at the BRCC campus, and provide excellent support for JOBS clients.

ABE/GED STUDENT INTERVIEW FOR ADVISORY PROGRAM

(To be completed by the earliest possible date after student is enrolled in class.)

Class Site_____Instructor_____

Interviewer_____Date_____

****

Student's Name_____Nickname?_____

Address_____

Phone_____Birthdate_____Birthplace_____

How long have you lived there?_____

Married Single Divorced Widowed Children?_____

Cities and States where you have lived_____

****

Hobbies and Interests_____

Skills or additional training_____

Where employed_____

Description of job_____

****

School last attended_____

Why did you leave public school?_____

Why did you decide to come to class now?_____

Did anyone encourage you to come?_____Who?_____

Do you see problems that might make it hard for you to get to class?_____

Or stay in class?_____

Do you see any reason you might have trouble being in a classroom setting? (for example: poor eyesight, uncomfortable chairs, difficulty sitting still or being quiet)_____

_____

Other Procedures

In response to the input we were getting from students and instructors and our experiences as we proceeded with the project, we implemented several procedures.

(a). Beginning with Fall Quarter, 1991, a list of the names of students who did not return to class was sent to each corresponding instructor. This was done after each quarter. This list was generated from class attendance sheets and registration forms. As instructors knew their students well and were often the first contacts the students had with the college, they were often influential in getting the students back into class.

(b). A follow-up by mail was done each quarter for those students who dropped out for unknown reasons. Each student was sent a letter and a schedule of classes in the hopes that they might enroll in other classes.

(c). The names of students who did not return to class and who did not meet their goals were entered into a running list for the random sample to be used for the SPARK survey for 1991-1992.

Follow-up Survey

From the running list of students who left for unknown reasons throughout the year , a random sample were surveyed using the same procedures as used for the initial survey.

The team agreed that some students seemed to have some trouble understanding the survey form or questions. It was agreed, however, that in the interest of a more standard procedure we would use the same form as in the initial survey. Future surveys will be redone to use a simpler form.

Of 189 surveys mailed, 37 (20%) were completed and returned. Following is a ranking (most to least frequent) of the "agree" and "strongly agree" responses to the second survey:

Rank	Question	Number agree or strongly agree
1	I began work	15
2	My work schedule changed	14
3 tie	I had money problems	12
	I did not have enough time for class	12
4	I did not have transportation	11
5 tie	I could not come at class times	9
	Family members had health problems	9
6	I had health problems	8
7	I did not have child care	7
8 3-way tie	I moved to another area	6
	The material was too hard	6
	It would have taken too long to finish	6
9	The GED is not important to me	5
10 tie	I finished the GED	4
	There was a death in my family	4
11 3-way tie	I learned what I needed	3
	I did not like the material	3
	I never attended ABE/GED classes	3
12 4-way tie	I had money problems	2
	Classes were too far away	2
	Family members did not want me to be in class	2
	I did not like the instructor	2
13 tie	I did not like the classroom	1
	The material was too easy	1

No responses of "agree" or "strongly agree were given for "I was uncomfortable with the class members.

The most important reasons seem to be the same as the responses on the initial survey indicate, with getting a job, having a schedule change on the job, money problems, and lack of transportation among the top reasons given for leaving classes.

In the follow-up survey, 29 people either "agree" or " strongly agree" with the response "I want to start classes again".

There was a drop in the percentage of surveys returned from 33% to 20%. Several possible reasons come to mind for this difference. The follow-up survey was sent during the summer, when many of our students are busy with seasonal employment, children at home, etc. Additionally, a deadline was established for the return of the survey.

The percentage of surveys returned as non-deliverable also dropped. In the follow-up survey sixteen (8.5%) were returned undelivered. This rate is down significantly from the 29 (15%) found in the initial survey. It is possible that our students are simply less likely to move during the summer months than at other times of the year.

BLUE RIDGE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Office for Continuing Education

July 22, 1992

Name
Address

Dear :

You have been selected to help with a very important survey. Please take the time to fill out the enclosed question form. As soon as we receive your form, we will mail you a **FREE GIFT!**

We need information to better serve students in ABE/GED classes. **YOU** are the person who can help us get the information we need. The information will be confidential. No one will know who completed each form. We will use the information to schedule classes and order material. Please help!

To receive your free gift, complete the address section below and return it with your survey in the stamped envelope postmarked no later than August 7, 1992. Thank you for helping us. We hope you enjoy your gift.

Sincerely yours,

Rick Marshall
Director for Literacy and Special Programs

RM/bhh

****
****

Mail my free gift to:

Name: (we put their name, etc.)
Address:
City:
Phone: _____

If there is an error, PLEASE MAKE NAME & ADDRESS CORRECTIONS.

_____ Check here if you would like someone to contact you about this survey or about ABE/GED classes.

ROUTE 2, BOX 133A
FLAT ROCK
NORTH CAROLINA 28731-9624
704-692-3572

FOLLOW-UP STUDENT SURVEY

Directions: Circle the number for the phrase that best shows how much you agree or disagree with each statement. All Answers will be confidential.

1	2	3	4	5
strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	strongly agree

I did **not** return to ABE/GED class because:

1	2	3	4	5	I finished the GED.
10	**17**	**1**	**3**	**1**	
27%	46%	2%	8%	2%	

1	2	3	4	5	I learned what I needed.
10	**10**	**10**	**1**	**2**	
27%	27%	27%	2%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	the GED is not important to me.
23	**5**	**1**	**1**	**4**	
62%	14%	2%	2%	11%	

1	2	3	4	5	it would have taken too long to finish.
8	**10**	**10**	**4**	**2**	
22%	27%	27%	11%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not like the classroom.
10	**18**	**6**	**1**	**0**	
27%	49%	16%	2%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not like the instructor.
15	**16**	**2**	**2**	**0**	
41%	43%	5%	5%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not like the material.
12	**15**	**4**	**0**	**3**	
32%	41%	11%	0%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	the material was too easy.
7	**14**	**12**	**1**	**0**	
19%	38%	32%	2%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	the material was too hard.
2	**14**	**12**	**2**	**4**	
5%	38%	32%	5%	11%	

1	2	3	4	5	I had health problems.
14	**11**	**2**	**6**	**2**	
38%	30%	5%	16%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	family members had health problems.
10	**11**	**5**	**6**	**3**	
27%	30%	14%	16%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	there was a death in my family.
14	**12**	**2**	**2**	**2**	
38%	32%	5%	5%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	I was uncomfortable with the class members.
10	**15**	**9**	**0**	**0**	
27%	41%	24%	0%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I had money problems.
8	**12**	**3**	**6**	**6**	
22%	32%	8%	16%	16%	

1	2	3	4	5	family members did not want me to be in class.
22	**8**	**3**	**0**	**2**	
60%	22%	8%	0%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have child care.
12	**12**	**4**	**5**	**2**	
32%	32%	11%	14%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	I could not come at the class times.
9	**8**	**7**	**9**	**0**	
24%	22%	19%	24%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have enough time for class.
7	**11**	**5**	**8**	**4**	
19%	30%	14%	22%	11%	

1	2	3	4	5	I began work.
5	**9**	**6**	**12**	**3**	
14%	24%	16%	32%	8%	

1	2	3	4	5	my work schedule changed.
7	**9**	**5**	**9**	**5**	
19%	24%	14%	24%	14%	

1	2	3	4	5	I did not have transportation.
7	**12**	**3**	**7**	**4**	
19%	32%	8%	19%	11%	

1	2	3	4	5	classes were too far away.
11	**14**	**7**	**2**	**0**	
30%	38%	19%	5%	0%	

1	2	3	4	5	I moved to another area.
10	**16**	**2**	**4**	**2**	
27%	43%	5%	11%	5%	

1	2	3	4	5	I want to start classes again.
0	0	6	10	19	
0%	0%	16%	27%	51%	

1	2	3	4	5	I never attended ABE/GED classes.
13	15	2	2	1	
35%	41%	5%	5%	2%	

Evaluation

In evaluating the program, an objective comparison of data from the year before the project was made against that gathered for the project year. In addition to developing the process for an effective retention program, a goal of the project was to achieve an increase of 20% in the retention rate.

Many basic education students exhibit a pattern of inconsistent attendance at classes. Frequently, they attend classes for a time, leave for several months or years, and then reenter the program. For this reason, it is often hard to determine when a student has left the program.

For the purpose of our study, students who did not attend classes by the end of the quarter after their last attendance were considered leavers. With more accurate and readily accessible data becoming available through the Literacy Education Information System (LEIS), retention data will be much more readily available. This system will enable colleges to evaluate retention figures from a number of other perspectives.

Many of our students do not attend summer quarter. Children normally in school are at home and require supervision. Some students temporarily leave for seasonal jobs. In consideration of these factors, summer quarter figures were not evaluated.

Following is a compilation of data for the SPARK Project:

ENROLLMENT TOTALS FOR PROGRAM YEAR 1990-1991 = 875

Fall 1990	263
Winter 1990-91	308
Spring 1991	304

ENROLLMENT TOTALS FOR PROGRAM YEAR 1991-1992 = 928

Fall 1991	278
Winter 1991-92	348
Spring 1992	302

PERCENTAGES OF DROPS BY PROGRAM YEAR

Program Year 1990-1991	348 students
Program Year 1991-1992	285 students

Program Year 1990-1991 Percent of Drops = 40%
Program Year 1991-1992 Percent of Drops = 31%

Retention Increase = 9%

Computational totals reflect the following procedures:

*Deleted from the "drop list" those classes that did not continue, beginning fall quarter 1991.

*Compared percentage rates between program years to obtain the result.

*Comparisons are made for those classes which are open to the general public only.

RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

A goal of a 20% increase in the retention rate was established for the project. The achieved increase was 9%. This increase in retention was achieved, however, during a year when we experienced an enrollment increase of 53 students (just over 6%) in the classes studied.

In identifying factors which contributed to the drop rate of our students, we were not able to isolate clearly-identified, easily-managed problems which we could focus on. As Henderson and Transylvania Counties are rural and have no public transportation system, lack of transportation will probably continue to be a barrier for the foreseeable future. While the lack of child care was cited by many people as a barrier, little help is available except through agencies such as Department of Social Services. Among the most frequently cited reasons for leaving the program were work-related reasons (getting a job, change of work schedule, etc.). Most of the new jobs in the area are in service industries, which historically don't pay as well as other areas.

Many of our students who drop are "behind the curve" in the job market. They can't compete successfully for the better-paying jobs because of inadequate basic skills, but they can't afford to pass up the employment opportunities they do find.

In addition to the retention rate increase and the development of the process for the project, we learned a great deal about ourselves through the project.

During the SPARK project we changed a number of our procedures and found ourselves becoming more responsive to the needs of our students. One area of change has been that of GED testing. While the changes in the testing program were not a direct result of the SPARK Project, they have achieved significant results in the numbers of GED completions and have enhanced retention.

Blue Ridge Community College operates two GED Testing Centers; one at the Transylvania Center and one on the main campus. For several years, the center on the main campus tested only during the day. While GED proctors would test at night upon request, no regularly scheduled evening testing occurred. In one calendar year of offering increased testing opportunities including one evening session per week at the campus center, we have experienced a 50% increase in the number of GED completions in Henderson County.

The advisory program started during the project proved to be a very beneficial exercise. We quickly found that we were underestimating the amount of time we would need for the interviews with our students. Most of the students responded with openness and enthusiasm to our questions and our interest in them. They were generally very honest about their opinions concerning their classes and the programs of the college. While the advisory program was not intended as a "troubleshooting" exercise, the students often gave us valuable feedback which we shared with instructors.

Among the activities which developed with the advisory program was that of referral. Students were often interested in other programs offered at the college, but didn't know who to contact for information. Referrals were made for financial aid, career exploration, counseling, and developmental courses. Some referrals were made to community agencies for assistance.

The SPARK Project provided us the opportunity to try some new things. We achieved an increase in the retention rate, but perhaps as importantly, we took a good look at what we are doing with our program. We listened to our students through their completed surveys, telephone conversations, and interviews. This process reminded us that our students are individual people, and that any gains we make will result from working the program "one student at a time".

The project caused us to work together in somewhat different ways while providing us with a central focus. We gained a deeper appreciation for our instructors and for the problems they deal with on a daily basis.

Through the project we have started a process of self-evaluation. By looking at what we are doing in a planned, systematic way we have identified numerous strengths in our program as well as some problem areas. By applying what we have learned, we hope to continue improving the program.